Food Stamps for the Stars

Brad Donovan

Accounts of parties at Brautigan's Pine Creek, Montana, home are legendary: movie stars, gun practice off the back porch, drinking, lots of drinking, wild conversations, and spaghetti. Brad Donovan, a fishing friend of Brautigan's, tells a story of one party in this essay. Although tongue-in-cheek, Donovan's essay captures the wide-open spirit associated with a Brautigan party. Donovan's essay was first published in *The Firestarter* (June 1996), a magazine "celebrating the natural and cultural diversity of Southwest Montana."

Brautigan took his parties seriously. They were planned like a military campaign, anticipating heavy casualties. But I had yet to "come under fire" on that innocent fall day when Richard called to invite me and the little keeper to a barbecue.

It was the last reel of the Seventies and we had moved here [Bozeman, Montana] because Richard invited us to go fishing. Then I forgot I had a career and joined a group of misfits who drank too much, raised lying to an art form but were good-hearted about it.

It was a fun scene and we were proud to do our bit, like extras in an Eskimo beach movie. So when Richard called back to ask me to bring some food, I agreed. A quick tour of the supermarket brought back a mound of burger and an armload of condiments. Sloppy Joes, the secret recipe kind. Then Richard called back to say that so-and-so was coming to the party, could we get more food. Hearing the famous name made my little helper search for something sexy to wear, and me to search for something interesting to say. She had more luck than I, but that is the reason for our story, to reveal how, at one of Brautigan's parties, we joined the stars in a conspiracy against the Department of Agriculture.

At the IGA we decided we could not feed these special guests mere Sloppy Joes, but needed something sophisticated, continental, like spaghetti. I spent all our cash on Dago Red, then crossed that line when I nonchalantly tossed down the last of our food stamps to pay for a shopping cart load of Ragu.

"We're Mormons. Italian Mormons," I explained.

Now government regulations forbid feeding other poor people with food stamps, let alone the rich and famous, who must eat a lot to satisfy our appetites. But it was a day that felt like a happening, the smoky air thick with meaning.

Richard's house in Pine Creek was western Gothic. A hacienda sort of house with a graceful arched front porch and a wrap-around back porch, and a kitchen that was the center of activity. The place was all trimmed in red-wood. It had its own unreal aspect because of the huge weird trees. The grand red barn, the Montana trash garden of old cars, the shooting range in the back-yard: all these were normal, and the house was fine and normal. But the place, like its owner, added up to Normal Plus.

For instance, as I began to prepare my secret sauce, Marinara In A Drum, Richard brought up pesto sauce. I did not know that recipe. So he recited the history of pesto, variations on the sauce, which stores in two counties had canned pesto and which aisles of those stores it was in, and the substance of olive oil. There was a narrative counter-melody too. The novels of Don Car-penter, writing a song for his friend Janis Joplin (who called it "Sweet. But not my style."), Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* ... no kidding.

Then Richard left for the phone, shoving Dennis into the kitchen to help. I did not trust the guy. He was a recovering English teacher, writing a book, poor bastard. And at the July Fourth rodeo, he had worn an Arab burnoose. Worse yet, during the intermission show, when Buffalo Sam pretends to sleep as his pet buffalo comforts him, the ancient bond between man and beast sym-bolized by this buffalo bending over Sam in felonious manner, Dennis shatters the sacramental silence by demanding, "Make it good for the buffalo too!" For a moment, human sacrifice was a real option. But he stashed the burnoose, and the crowd wallowed around a bit then settled down to wait for the bull-riding.

Not the sort of guy you'd expect to be handy in the kitchen, but typi-cal of Richard's friends: fun-loving, witty, tactful.

I was chopping onions when Dennis pulled a bookmark from some paperback and said, "Look what I found."

"It's a bookmark. An edible bookmark. Try it." He tore the paper in half and ate one piece. There was a purple dragon on my slip of paper, some sort of Eastern spice, he said. I ate the dragon-spice bookmark but did not taste anything. Richard had published *Plant This Book*, a collection of poems that included packets of vegetable seeds. I figured the bookmark was another of those medium-is-the-message trips.

I cannot remember when I have had so much fun cooking. Smashing the tomatoes was jolly, chopping onions had me in tears, the sight of Dennis frying burger was a real howler. I stirred in anything that looked like food, emptied Tabasco on it.

"Are you guys alright"? Richard inquired. "Come out here and meet a few people."

Why not? We were done in the kitchen. It looked like a produce truck had crashed into a cattle hauler.

My first star sighting was Clark Gable. I learned fact number one about them: they look like you expect them to look. It is disorienting to see a person for the first time and feel the sense of familiarity, of recognition, we reserve for our friends. Young Clark was gracious, casual, but not as big in person as on the screen where he is a celluloid shadow twelve feet tall.

We were passing the time by blowing holes in stuff with large caliber firearms. A TV set, a Pachinko game no one could figure out, dishes from a teflon party that had been snowed in and driven to cannibalism. Young Clark shouldered a rifle, sighted in on a Tab can, and I saw it meant more if he shot or missed the can, than how I shot because no one would remember my results. A clutch shot and he blew it away along with our tension when he joked, "Did I hit it?" like a guy who frankly did not give a damn.

Then Doris Day walked up to me and we talked recipes. She was that rarity, a beautiful woman who does not make you nervous. She appeared fascinated by what I was saying, or maybe she was curious about what language I was speaking. Anyhow, she made us feel welcome and we still think of her with fondness. Her dancing partner, Fred Astaire, was classy and eloquent, well informed, opinionated. And I realized that I had been judging these strangers as if they were required to measure up to our illusions, which is rule number two: Stars better do it right.

The cooking alarms where chiming that dinner was ready, so I flew into the kitchen. The man sampling the sauce was ... are you ready ... Humphrey Bogart!

"What the hell are you looking at, kid?"

"But you're dead," I suggested.

"I know I haven't worked in years. I've signed with a new agency, which doesn't amount to a hill of beans in this world."

Thus I came to rule number three: Stars must be tolerant because we ask them to explain the obvious.

We ate dinner. Most of it found my face. The noodles stopped their twitching but the spicy squid, the smoked whitefish from Japan and the salad from hell made a unique dining experience.

Back in the living room, I met Nixon, or the actor who played him on TV. He removed the false teeth that changed him from a real person into Nixon. Nixon's teeth took on a life of their own, enjoying a free lunch, on the dole. Torn loose from its moorings, the conversation grew like a swarm of fireflies. The actor, and Richard, when younger, had rented a station wagon

to go trout fishing in the Sierra Nevada. They blew four tires, sideswiped a tree, modified some big rocks. "How to return the car to the rental agency?" they wondered. The actor put on a Dr. Caligari disguise, along with an émigré accent and raved at the rental clerk about vandals, crime in the streets and that the car was in the ghetto. Is that a problem?

They did not go to jail, which shows one of the uses of the imagination. The rest of the evening was filled with similar stories, a string of ephemeral moments wired together by Brautigan's willpower. All of his books, and all of his days, were marked by the capacity for surprise and the knowledge that life is fleeting. He told the story about Baron von Richtofen, how the Red Baron, after dueling in the skies, would go into the forest at night and hunt wild boar with a knife, to unwind after a tough day of being an ace. He acted it out, and I saw him as some prehistoric hunter wielding an intellect that was not nice.

After another story about Richard's friend Ken Kesey, Dennis rambled on and on about who was hip, who on "on the bus" ... a topic for nostalgia buffs now perhaps, but this was before the Internet.

Dennis announced that he was on the bus. He had a ticket to go where no culture had gone before. We considered whether this was so. Then Richard drew himself up, acquired a solemn look and explained why the hippies had failed: "A bus ticket is not a license to kill."

We were stunned. We were speechless. Dennis drank a fifth of Calvados brandy and I drank the other one. It was almost dawn and we were still stunned but unfortunately not speechless.

Dennis greeted the fresh day from the roof of the chicken coop shrieking, "I'm a morning person." After that, the fresh day is a bit vague.

The memory is a trip of its own and maybe everything did not happen exactly as is related above. I remember the sunrise was awful loud. While puking in the front yard, there appeared to me a ring of mushrooms, and underneath them, a busload of leprechauns partying down. Recycled spaghetti and a river of booze rained down on their parade. The little people were not surprised by this treatment from a big star like me.

Richard peeked around the corner of the house. He looked like Mark Twain, and in a flash I accepted reincarnation. Like I said, it was a weird yard.

I got over my guilt about misusing my gifts from the Department of Agriculture. I had used official food to propitiate the gods, which is like feeding the homeless.

There would be other parties, equally magical and difficult to recall. Then Richard booked his trip on the choo-choo to nowhere.

What remains of the most original prose writer of his generation is in the books. As for the man, all we should feel is sympathy ... not for him, but for the party-goers in his next life.